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TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [OEXC](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: American Imam in Bahrain Stresses Shared Values, Interfaith Dialogue

Ref A: Manama 1292

Ref B: Manama 1433

1. Summary: U.S. speaker Imam Yahya Hendi, in public and private appearances across Bahrain, urged religious leaders to "put differences away," and to form a clear vision of the future based on foundations of political, economic, and social justice shared by Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike. Imam Hendi was received as a special guest of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, and was thus given extraordinary access to the most prominent religious leaders as well as student leaders, women activists, and journalists. His remarkable two-day visit was punctuated by lectures at University of Bahrain, and the Beit Al Quran museum, remarks at an Iftaar hosted by the Ambassador, and culminating in a lecture at the Grand Mosque attended by the deputy Prime Minister. In private meetings with government officials, Hendi discussed sectarian divisions in Bahrain and urged dialogue and reconciliation within Islam as well as with other religions. End Summary.

Reclaiming Islam from Extremists

2. On arrival in Bahrain Oct 19, Imam Hendi was received at the airport by the Ambassador and the Under Secretary of Islamic Affairs Dr. Fareed Muftah. Hendi and Muftah discussed the growing influence of Muslims in America, and the important role they play in forging connections with the rest of the world. Both Hendi and Muftah cited the need for more education to combat extremism. "It's about time we reclaim Islam from the extremists," Hendi said.

Bridging Sectarian Divisions

3. In a later meeting with Muftah, Hendi discussed sectarian divisions in Bahrain. Hendi described the unity of Sunni and Shia in the U.S., and emphasized the importance of religious and political freedom. "A system not built on absolute political, social, and economic justice, is a system doomed to fail," Hendi said. Muftah said Bahrain's Sunni and Shia communities could learn from this experience. In a later meeting with the Minister of Islamic Affairs and the Foreign Minister Hendi's assistance was requested in organizing a conference to facilitate a dialogue between Bahrain's sects and other religious communities. NOTE: A similar request involving sending Bahraini clerics to the U.S. was reported in Ref A, and requested by mission in Ref 1B.

Positive Press Coverage: "A Different Image of America"

4. Hendi's lecture to over 300 people at the Grand Mosque, including the deputy Premier and the Foreign Minister, was aired by Bahrain TV three times on Friday, October 21. All Arabic and English dailies carried extensive coverage of Hendi's visit, and the Imam conducted several interviews at a local press roundtable. Bahrain state television recorded an hour-long interview with Hendi as well as his lecture at Beit Al Quran museum, both to be aired during the last week in Ramadan. Mansoor Al-Jamri, editor of the independent Arabic daily Al Wasat, wrote in his weekly column about the Iftaar and Jama'a prayer at the Ambassador's residence: "The most amazing thing was to have a mixed group of Muslims pray and have Iftaar at the residence of the U.S. Ambassador. The overall atmosphere was filled with spirituality and conversations about religious tolerance and Islamic values. Imam Hendi represents a different image of America; America that likes to be called a "melting pot" for all races and religions. This new face of America defies many concepts that were engraved in our minds. America has become a country that melts Muslims and non-Muslims while we are still divided among our selves into smaller groups endlessly."

5. Hendi attended a roundtable of Arabic and English print media October 20. He tried to dispel impressions that Muslims have been under pressure to convert to Christianity in the U.S., noting the absolute religious freedom enjoyed by Muslims in the U.S. On the issue of treatment of Muslims at Guantanamo Bay, Hendi mentioned a group of influential Muslims who have helped the U.S. draft a 48-page document instructing the U.S. military on issues such as handling the Quran respectfully. He also said soldiers are instructed to

comply with international law and incidents of abuse are being investigated. He noted the number of Muslims working in the U.S. government and military is on the increase.

"In the Spirit of Ramadan, Dialogue of all Religions"

16. Hendi's message of interfaith dialogue as a force for unity resonated with Bahraini audiences. At the University of Bahrain, Hendi delivered his message to faculty and students from the Arabic and Islamic Studies Department. Hendi said Islam is going through a difficult period. There is a great need for public dialogue, scholarship, and reconciliation. Conflict and war are disabling our ability to deal with poverty and other important issues like the environment and education. Islamic, Christian, and Judaic teachings are nearly identical in the call for unity, reconciliation, and peace. Hendi also described the health of the seven million-strong Muslim community in America, including the increasing number of mosques and the availability of the Quran. He said Muslims in America, over time, are likely to become a much more politically influential minority. On the issue of Iraq, he said "America is not interested in colonizing any nation."

17. In addition to his lecture, Hendi held meetings with University President Sheikha Miriam Al Khalifa and Student Council President (a Salafi student of Islamic Studies) Ahmed Sultan Al-Harban.

Ambassador's Iftaar: "Same origins.same destiny"

18. Hendi's pivotal remarks at the Ambassador's Iftaar and discussions with key religious leaders, politicians, and opinion-leaders generated even more interest in the rest of his visit. He received an invitation to Iftaar at the Minister of Islamic Affairs home the following evening, and positive commentary in the press. "When people ask me where I am from, I often say I am from Dust. I am Dustian," said Hendi, quoting the Biblical reference. "We all have the same origins, and we all share a common destiny."

19. Hendi wove together quotes from the Quran, the Bible and the Talmud in his remarks. After the meal he participated in a lively discussion with a leading newspaper editor, members of parliament, and religious officials. On parting, one participant remarked to Hendi: "It is clear that you are proud to be an American and proud to be a Muslim. And we can all be proud of that."

Women's Empowerment

10. In a visit to the majlis of Ghada Jamsheer, head of the Women's Petition Committee (a group that has advocated for women's rights in matters of divorce, child custody, and alimony) Hendi discussed how Islam as a religion guarantees women complete political, social, and economic rights. This precept has not always been followed by governments and has often been misinterpreted by religious leaders. "A woman should demand these rights just as she performs her prayers on time," he said. Members of the Supreme Council for Women, the government umbrella for women's advocacy groups, expressed interest in working with Hendi in the future.

Grand Mosque: Reaching Across Faiths and Cultures

11. In his final appearance, Hendi gave an impassioned lecture to the packed Grand Mosque in downtown Manama, which the Ambassador attended. Hendi varied his themes of Islam in America and interfaith dialogue, emphasizing the importance of Ramadan fasting and charity as a philosophy of living that all faiths share. In discussions with leaders afterwards, including the Foreign Minister, Hendi addressed sectarian divisions in Bahrain. The officials (The Ministry of Islamic Affairs is predominantly Sunni) talked about engaging in dialogue with the Christian church, and visiting mosques in the Shia community. Officials also requested Hendi's assistance in organizing a conference on Interfaith dialogue.

12. Comment: We want to express our gratitude to IIP's Peter Benda and others who made the extra effort to bring Imam Hendi to the Gulf. His program was an astounding success in advancing mission goals of promoting mutual understanding across cultures, engaging women and youth audiences, and promoting voices of tolerance to counter extremism. Post plans for follow-on activities, including a special exchange program on "Interfaith Dialogue" bringing Bahraini clerics to the U.S. Now that Hendi is a known quantity in Bahrain, other potential follow-on activities may include: placement of articles or video by Hendi in local media, webchats, and Hendi's possible participation in a conference on Interfaith Dialogue to take place in Bahrain later this year. End Comment.